

ANALYSIS

"Passage to India" (1871)

Walt Whitman

(1819-1892)

"Passage to India" is the most transcendental of Whitman's poems, the most notable expression of mysticism in his writings. He begins by celebrating the physical explorations of man. Columbus, in discovering America, was seeking a water-route to India. The completion of the American transcontinental railroad, the Atlantic cable, and the Suez Canal had accomplished the 'rondure' of the earth and brought India nearer to the Western world.

But these physical voyages and explorations are mere symbols, in man's development, of spiritual voyages and explorations. Since Oriental religious thought, preeminently, has been concerned with the problem of spiritual reality. 'Passage to India' suggests the soul's confronting of the 'aged fierce enigmas.' The solution of these enigmas becomes possible only in the mystic union of the soul with God... In the end the soul achieves 'passage to more than India,' perhaps in a double sense: to more than a physical India, and to a spiritual realization which transcends even the highest of the Brahmins. The poem recalls Emerson's and Thoreau's interest in the Oriental scriptures."

James E. Miller, Jr.

The Literature of the United States, 3rd edition
(Scott, Foresman, 1953, 1961, 1963) 152

"The shifting quality of Whitman's verse makes one think that whenever he was headed for the universal he was headed for trouble. It seems to be one of our American assumptions that there is something inherently good and beautiful about the universal [a characteristic of Modernism]. Yet all too often when we praise a poem for having universal significance we mean no more than that it has divested itself of troublesome and recalcitrant particularity and dissipated its energies into this or that general idea which is more readily available to critical or moralistic discussion than are the other elements of poetry.

If pieces like 'Passage to India' [composed in 1868], and 'Song of the Universal' (1874), together with the large number of related poems, do not appeal to us very much, it is because Whitman has given up poetry and become a speechmaker. This seems clearly illustrated by the following three lines from 'Passage to India':

The Past--the dark unfathom'd retrospect!
The teeming gulf--the sleepers and the shadows!
The past--the infinite greatness of the past!

After an excellent (if derivative) first line, and a satisfactory second, the poet is tongue-tied and the orator takes over, declaiming vulgarly from his editorial chair or his public platform... [What follows] is merely vague spirituality, a hollow optimism, a sententious courting of immortality, a mystic identification with the universe....

Whitman's later poetry bespeaks a mind in which productive tensions have been relaxed.... The musing, humorous, paradoxically indolent but unpredictably energetic satyr-poet of the early 1850's becomes the large, bland, gray personage with the vague, light blue eyes and the circumambient beard. Dionysius becomes not Apollonian but positively Hellenistic--prematurely old, nerveless, soothsaying, spiritually universalized. The deft and flexible wit disappears along with the contraries and disparities which once produced it. The pathos, once so moving when the poet contemplated the disintegration of the self or felt the loss which all living things know, is now generalized out into a vague perception of the universal...."

Richard Chase

Walt Whitman Reconsidered
(William Sloane, 1955) 146-49

"Three great material triumphs prompted this poem: the laying of the Atlantic cable in 1866, the opening of the Suez Canal, and the completion of the Union Pacific Railroad in 1869. Whitman felt that these events heralded a great era of peace in which a superior civilization would be created by captains and engineers, noble inventors and scientists. To him the opening of the Suez Canal meant union with India, where civilization had perhaps been born. But the whole poem rests on Whitman's recognition that his faith in democracy had been premature, that much still remained to be done before the New World could achieve the ideals he had celebrated in his earlier work. From the world as it was he turned aside in 'Passage to India' to imagine a utopia still to come."

Max J. Herzberg & staff
The Reader's Encyclopedia of American Literature
(Crowell, 1962)

"...The theme of the poem is not materialistic achievement...but spiritual fusion. Whitman calls for an achievement of the soul to match the marvelous achievement of the hands. The main substance of the poem is made up of the poet's sweeping visions. The first is spatial, climaxed by the 'tableaus twain' of Section 3 which dramatize the crossing through the canal and traveling over the railroad. The second is temporal, a view of time as it has been embodied sequentially in myth (Section 5) and as it has been set forth in history (Section 6). In the latter is imbedded a vivid vignette of Columbus, who himself had, like the poet, dreamed of a passage to India. As the poet calls out in Section 7 for passage to 'primal thought,' to 'reason's early paradise, / Back, back to wisdom's birth, to innocent intuitions,' his desire approaches that of the mystic to transcend time and space and to merge with the Transcendent. Section 8 is a dramatization of that merging as only the poet can portray it in the ecstasy of his vision.... This mystical merge which can be sensed in life is but a foretaste of the Union attained in death.... The final section of the poem is a fervent appeal by the poet to his soul to sail out...to achieve that spiritual union for which the rounding of the globe has been but a preparation."

James E. Miller, Jr.
Walt Whitman
(Twayne, 1962) 101

"His later recollections...tell of his own distresses. Only the common man and a statesman with the best virtues of the common man kept him faithful to the idealism of the earlier *Leaves*, but no longer egoistically confident. And to the disillusion of history must be added personal griefs and frustrations, their exact source unknown, though love and loss were evidently their source. No one, for example, can fail to note the deepening of every noble emotion in...*'Passage to India'* (1871), which contains his most eloquent idealism. The theme is in the question asked by the feverish children of the modern age, 'Whither, O mocking life?' The marriage of the seas in the Suez Canal, the crossing of the continent by steel, do not satisfy, they are but shadows of a greater dream. There must be passage to more than India. The soul, 'that actual me,' must voyage beyond its material successes in order to amplify its love, its ideals, its 'purity, perfection, strength.' So 'sail forth--steer for the deep waters only.'"

Henry Seidel Canby
Literary History of the United States, 3rd edition
(MacMillan, 1963) 488-89

"The development of Whitman's religious attitudes ran parallel with the increasingly formal shapes his verse took after the Civil War. A sign of the direction in which his thought was moving is his increased use of the word God in the late poems. Though there was no sharp break in his development, there is considerable difference in tone and attitude between the poems in the 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass* and, say, *'Passage to India'*, his last major poem...."

Hyatt H. Waggoner
American Poets: From the Puritans to the Present
(Houghton, 1968) 669

"...'Passage to India'...has been shown to have been as haphazardly constructed (or contrived) as *Democratic Vistas*. Whitman, the transcendentalist poet of the present, has now become the poet of the future. The Civil War shook his confidence, almost irrevocably--not in the people themselves but in the idea that representatives of the 'divine average' would ever come into their own political kingdom. Things had not worked out as he hoped. The economy was weak, and several of Whitman's stage driver and railroad-worker comrades were out of work. Also, his country had not yet absorb [ed] him as affectionately as he [had] absorbed it.... In 'Passage to India' the focus is on democracy, which must and will transcend its shortcomings but probably only (for now at least) by going beyond the material and mortal...."

Jerome Loving
Walt Whitman: The Song of Himself
(U California, 1999) 333